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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 002490

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KJUS](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: 100 PRESIDENTIAL ASPIRANTS, BUT ONLY FOUR REAL
CONTENDERS

REF: A. MANILA 2428 (TICKETS TAKE SHAPE)
[1](#)B. MANILA 2218 (ERAP DECLARES)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) After a final flurry of filings December 1, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) closed out its election registration period by announcing it had received 98 applications from presidential candidates. Of course the number of credible presidential aspirants amounts to a mere handful of candidates, and COMELEC predicts numerous disqualifications in the coming weeks. Senator Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III remains the front-runner in all polls, though Senator Manuel "Manny" Villar fielded the largest slate of Senatorial picks for his Nacionalista party. Former President Joseph Estrada registered his candidacy, and a rival quickly challenged his eligibility; Estrada's case will likely end up in the Supreme Court, where he will face an uphill battle. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo filed to run for a congressional seat in Pampanga province, exacerbating her detractors' concerns about her intentions. Arroyo's plan to remain politically active likely complicates the campaign of ruling party candidate Gilberto Teodoro, who will now find it more difficult to distance himself from the unpopular Arroyo. Star boxer Manny Pacquiao and family members of former President Marcos, including former First Lady Imelda Marcos, have also registered to run for legislative offices. End Summary.

CANDIDATES REGISTER

[1](#)2. (SBU) Commission on Elections (COMELEC) staff told us December 2 that COMELEC offices received 98 candidacy applications from presidential aspirants by the registration deadline of midnight on December 1. Philippine law allows candidacies that are not backed by a political party, so the hurdle for filing is low. The vast majority of the 98 are not likely to draw meaningful support from the electorate; some are political unknowns. A COMELEC official publicly predicted that COMELEC would be able to vet the candidacies by the end of December and likely would disqualify a majority of the applicants; he predicted 25 might make the final cut. (In 2004, 84 candidates filed to run for the presidency; only seven received COMELEC approval. The COMELEC has the authority to disqualify candidates who appear frivolous or unable to run a national campaign.)

[1](#)3. (C) Credible polling organizations have not publicly released new data since ref A reported Senator Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III's commanding lead. On November 24, Senator Francis "Chiz" Escudero announced he would not run

for election to an executive branch position in 2010. (Escudero's term as Senator expires in 2013.) We believe that, were the election to take place under current conditions, voters who favored Escudero would likely move disproportionately to Aquino. Senator Manuel "Manny" Villar appears to remain Aquino's primary credible challenger.

FORMER PRESIDENT FILES PAPERS

¶4. (C) The most recent polls also indicated double-digit support for former President Joseph Estrada, who formally registered his presidential candidacy on November 30. As expected, a political opponent filed a challenge, citing constitutional restrictions on a President running for reelection (for background, see ref B). It is unclear whether the COMELEC will favor Estrada or he challenger, but, whichever way COMELEC decide, the disadvantaged party appears likely to appeal COMELEC's ruling to the Supreme Court.

¶5. (C) We met on December 2 with Christian Monsod, a former COMELEC Chairman and drafter of the current constitution. Monsod believed that the Supreme Court could easily disqualify Estrada, relying on the plain meaning of the constitution's prohibition on reelection. (Article VII, Section 4 of the constitution reads: "The President shall not be eligible for any reelection.") Furthermore, the drafters had considered a prohibition on "immediate reelection" before agreeing to prohibit "any reelection." Therefore, Monsod said, the record of the drafters' deliberations would further

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demonstrate intent to disqualify a candidate such as Estrada. Nevertheless, Monsod conceded that it was not impossible for the Court to decide that this question could be left up to the voters to resolve by allowing Estrada to run for reelection.

THE PRESIDENT RUNS FOR CONGRESS

¶6. (C) President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, meanwhile, filed papers with COMELEC in order to run for a congressional seat in her home province of Pampanga. Numerous commentators have noted there is no precedent for a Philippine President to seek a lower elected position. Many suspect Arroyo aims to win election as Speaker of the House, primarily in order to use the influence associated with that position to protect herself and her family from accusations of corruption. Noting previous trial balloons from the President's allies about undertaking constitutional reform, and possibly shifting from a presidential to a parliamentary system, some believe Arroyo's ultimate goal is to restructure the government in order that she can once again become the nation's chief executive.

¶7. (C) After Arroyo filed her candidacy papers, former President Fidel Ramos publicly criticized Arroyo's move. In unusually blunt language, Ramos said that Arroyo should resign the presidency. Under current circumstances, she would have unfair advantages in her congressional race; the election would distract her from her presidential duties; and she would "diminish the stature of the presidency."

¶8. (C) Widespread suspicions of Arroyo's intentions, and her candidacy in the coming election, will likely hamper the efforts of Gilberto Teodoro, the presidential candidate of the ruling Lakas-Kampi-CMD party, to distance himself from the unpopular President. (September survey data from credible polling organization Social Weather Stations showed Arroyo had a 23 percent approval rating, and a 62 percent disapproval rating.) Arroyo recently resigned as Lakas-Kampi-CMD Chair, ceding that position to Teodoro. With Arroyo remaining in the political arena, however, it may be difficult for Filipinos to believe Teodoro will define his

own agenda rather than simply serve Arroyo's interests.

¶9. (C) Posing yet another challenge to the cohesion of the ruling party, former Metropolitan Manila Develop Authority Chairman Bayani Fernando has deserted the Arroyo camp and teamed up with Senator Richard Gordon, forming a rival ticket headed by Gordon. It is unclear whether Bayani, who had challenged Teodoro for the Lakas-Kampi-CMD presidential nomination, will bring much of his former party's machinery with him, but his registration for the vice presidential race further demonstrates wide cracks in the party.

MARCOS FAMILY CANDIDATES

¶10. (C) The 2010 election will also allow voters the chance to elect three members of former President Ferdinand Marcos' immediate family to office. Former First Lady Imelda Marcos registered to run for a congressional seat from the province of Ilocos Norte. Her son, Ferdinand "Bong-Bong" Marcos, Jr., is running on a Villar-backed slate for the Senate, and her daughter, Imee Marcos, will stand for election as Governor of Ilocos Norte. Ilocos Norte being a stronghold of the Marcos family, the Marcos women are well positioned to win their races; Bong-Bong Marcos is less certain of victory, since Senators compete on a nationwide basis.

MANNY PACQUIAO IN ANOTHER ARENA

¶11. (SBU) Riding a wave of popular enthusiasm, star boxer Manny Pacquiao has registered to run for Congress in the southern province of Sarangani. It is unclear whether widespread speculation about his friendship with actress Krista Ranillo, which has rankled Pacquiao's wife, will hinder the boxer's prospects for election. Pacquiao's previous run for a Congressional seat from General Santos city ended in a rare defeat for the boxing champ, as he lost out to diminutive, politically savvy Darlene Antonino-Custodio, deputy minority leader in the House of Representatives. The move to more rural Sarangani could boost Pacquiao's chances for victory.

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COMMENT

¶12. (C) Although the registration deadline has passed, COMELEC prohibits candidates for national office from campaigning until February. Nevertheless, the media has ample material for its coverage of the political fray: angst over Arroyo's intentions, Estrada's legal battle, prospects for continued violence in the South, and the antics of inconsequential-but-colorful candidates. In this context, it may be difficult for Villar, Teodoro, or some other rival to focus public attention on a message that would allow any of them to draw within striking range of Aquino.

KENNEY